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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Such devices require a reader to participate actively in the novel, as the reader begins to (implicitly or explicitly) interpret non-literal elements of the tale.

Tan utilizes images frequently, as she draws us into a Chinese-American life: images of birds, water, imbalance/balance, winds, and colors to gesture beyond literal descriptions. The story of the Moon Lady, with “new tiger clothes,” a turtle, blood, a servant bird, provides rich examples of figurative language. In this story, the Moon Lady provides an imaginative figure for a young child.



Discussion Activities

Return to the eight tales you have read thus far. Divide the class and have groups examine figurative language in each story. Ask students to identify similes and metaphors. In each story, how does figurative language assist in telling the story? Have groups present their findings to the class.



Writing Exercise

Tan has an uncommon gift for figurative language. Here she describes a storm with a striking metaphor: “I saw that lightning had eyes and searched to strike down little children” (p. 103). Here she uses a simile to describe the emotions of a young child: “My heart felt like crickets scratching to get out of a cage” (p. 45). Here she describes Old Lady Jong: “And her fingers felt like a dead person’s, like an old peach I once found in the back of a refrigerator” (p. 137). Have students write a metaphor or simile for three different things: an aspect of nature (like a storm), a familiar emotion (like love or jealousy), and the description of a person (a friend or family member).



Homework

Have students read the next two chapters (pp. 147-184). Lena’s mother describes her: “she like a ghost, disappear.” Are ghosts symbols of a more complex image?